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Blocking Soviet phone spies

President Carter has come in from the cold in the matter of Soviet interception of domestic American long-distance telephone calls.

Previously, Mr. Carter and his immediate predecessors had stonewalled in public when asked about foreign nations, particularly the Soviet Union, eavesdropping on Americans' telephone conversations. However, last week, in a low-key announcement and a somewhat cryptic briefing, White House spokesmen disclosed that Mr. Carter has approved a program to hamstring the eavesdropping.

The fact that Mr. Carter decided to go public with his program is significant considering that he had responded tartly and evasively when the matter came up in a press conference last July. The President took a cheap shot at Sen. Patrick Moynihan (D., N. Y.), whose criticism of the government's inactivity had triggered the press conference question, and then noting that nations have a "common ability" to intercept long distance phone calls, said:

"... I would not interpret this use by the Soviet Union or by other embassies to be an act of aggression. And although it may be an intrusion into our security, I think we are taking adequate steps now to prevent its creating a threat to our country."

The steps, disclosed last week by Mr. Carter's aides, are to complete work underway to route government telephone calls through underground cables rather than through microwave radio towers; enlarge an experimental program to equip key surveillance

targets with units that scramble conversations; and persuade vulnerable industries to secure their telephone communications.

By eavesdropping on American long-distance calls, the Soviets and some of their satellite countries have been gathering military and other intelligence data, including economic data. Adm. Stansfield Turner, director of the CIA, warned in a Chicago last week that hijackers, gangsters and industrial spies, as well as foreign agents, could be involved in the eavesdropping.

The decision to go public with the program appears partly in response to Senator Moynihan's prodding and partly to encourage industry to take security measures. It also appears to represent failure on the part of the government to persuade the Soviets to desist.

In any event, it is a welcome announcement, though long overdue.